

BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0027
JACK WILSON

JANUARY 23, 1976

FOCUS: PAUL ROBESON

ANNCR:

PAUL ROBESON, ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST FAMOUS BLACK AMERICAN ARTISTS, HAS DIED IN PHILADELPHIA AT THE AGE OF SEVENTY-SEVEN. VOA'S JACK WILSON HAS THIS PROFILE.

VOICE:

AN ACCOMPLISHED SINGER AND ACTOR, PAUL ROBESON WAS ALSO, IN YEARS PAST, AN OFTEN CONTROVERSIAL FIGURE -- AS AN ACTIVIST FOR CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE UNITED STATES AND AS AN ADVOCATE OF INDEPENDENCE FOR BLACK PEOPLE EVERYWHERE.

DURING THE EARLY 1950'S, HIS AMERICAN PASSPORT WAS SUSPENDED BECAUSE OF ALLEGED COMMUNIST SYMPATHIES. BUT IN 1958, THE U.S. SUPREME COURT RESTORED HIS RIGHT TO TRAVEL ABROAD. BUT BEYOND POLITICS, MISTER ROBESON WAS RESPECTED AND ADMIRER AS AN ARTIST, BELOVED FOR HIS DEEPLY-FELT RENDITION OF BLACK SPIRITUAL MUSIC.

PAUL ROBESON WAS BORN IN PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY, IN 1898. HIS FATHER, BORN A SLAVE, WAS THE MINISTER OF A SMALL BLACK CONGREGATION. YOUNG PAUL WAS AN OUTSTANDING STUDENT WHO WON A SCHOLARSHIP AT RUTGERS COLLEGE AT A TIME WHEN FEW BLACKS ATTENDED UNIVERSITIES IN THE UNITED STATES. OVERCOMING RACIAL DIFFICULTIES OF THE PERIOD, HE DISTINGUISHED HIMSELF BOTH AS A SCHOLAR AND IN ATHLETICS. HE WAS TWICE NAMED AN ALL-AMERICAN FOOTBALL PLAYER. THESE YOUTHFUL ACCOMPLISHMENTS ADDED LUSTER TO HIS LEGEND AS HE SUBSEQUENTLY ROSE TO FAME.

HE GRADUATED FROM THE COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LAW SCHOOL IN NEW YORK -- AGAIN A RARE ACHIEVEMENT FOR A BLACK MAN OF THAT PERIOD -- BUT IN THE MEANTIME HAD BECOME INTERESTED IN ACTING AND SINGING. AFTER TAKING PART IN AN AMATEUR PLAY, HE WENT TO LONDON IN 1922 TO ACT THE ROLE OF A BLACK MAN IN A PRODUCTION CALLED "TABOO." RETURNING TO THE UNITED STATES, HE STARRED IN "EMPEROR JONES," A PLAY WRITTEN FOR HIM BY EUGENE O'NEILL.

DURING THIS SAME PERIOD, ROBESON BEGAN TO STUDY VOICE SERIOUSLY AND IN 1925 GAVE A WIDELY-NOTED CONCERT, PRESENTING A PROGRAM OF ALL-NEGRO MUSIC WHICH WAS A SENSATIONAL SUCCESS. FOR THE NEXT THREE DECADES, HIS CONCERTS WITH LAWRENCE BROWN AT THE PIANO, WERE POPULAR EVENTS ALL OVER THE UNITED STATES AND ABROAD.

AFTER THAT, HE WAS A WORLD-WIDE FIGURE -- PERFORMING BOTH AS AN ACTOR AND A SINGER WITH EVER-INCREASING ACCLAIM.

AFTER APPEARING IN SHAKESPEARE'S "OTHELLO" IN LONDON, HE REPEATED THAT SUCCESS IN NEW YORK IN 1944. HIS PORTRAYAL HAD THE LONGEST RUN OF ANY SHAKESPEAREAN PLAY ON BROADWAY. MANY MORE MILLIONS OF PEOPLE BECAME FAMILIAR WITH HIS BASS BARITONE VOICE WHEN HE PERFORMED "THE BALLAD FOR AMERICANS" ON RADIO AND IN SUBSEQUENT CONCERTS. HE ALSO APPEARED IN MANY MOTION PICTURES; INCLUDING THE HOLLYWOOD VERSION OF "SHOWBOAT" AND THE BRITISH-MADE FILMS, "SAUNDERS OF THE RIVER" AND "KING SOLOMON'S MINES."

MISTER ROBESON HAD BEEN IN RETIREMENT FOR A DECADE -- BUT TO AMERICANS WHO REMEMBER HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ARTS, HIS GOLDEN VOICE REMAINS -- ON PHONOGRAPH RECORDS STILL - TREASURED BY THOSE WHO HEARD HIM SING OR SAW HIM ACT.

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///EDITORS: MUSIC TO GO WITH ABOVE SCRIPT AVAILABLE IN TAPE
LIBRARY. SELECTIONS AS FOLLOWS: DEEP RIVER; WATER BOY;
SWING LOW, SWEET CHARIOT; NOBODY KNOWS THE TROUBLES I'VE
SEEN, FROM ALBUM "SONGS OF MY PEOPLE."

WJL/PBM/CAK